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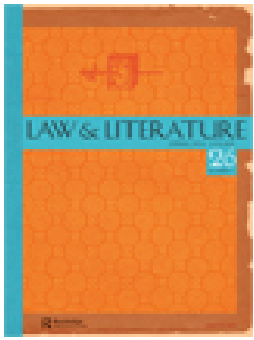
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Matters of Silence

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BOOK REVIEW

MATTERS OF SILENCE

Sessizin Payı (The Share of the Silent) by Nurdan Gürbilek (Istanbul: Metis, 2015) 152 pp., \$15.50, ISBN 113 978-975-342-995-5

Nurdan Gürbilek is one of Turkey's master essayists. She has been honing her craft for over two decades, though she is only known in English translation for a single collection of essays published in 2011, *The New Cultural Climate in Turkey: Living in a Shop Window*.¹ Gürbilek's forte as a writer has been to offer invaluable illuminations on various urgent or latent cultural, social, and political quandaries and tensions in Turkey. She does this by summoning critical theory (Walter Benjamin and Edward Said are frequent companions) and by thinking through and alongside works of literature (often, but not exclusively, Turkish and Russian classics), and occasionally other cultural artifacts. An ongoing albeit underlying concern in Gürbilek's oeuvre has been justice, in terms of both an intellectual commitment to social justice, and a sustained labor of stylistic exploration as a key method of doing justice to her subject matter – stylistically, her writing is often stunning. In this new collection of essays, justice comes to the fore as a central concern: will the silent get their due? Yet the “silent” of the title takes various shapes throughout the five essays that comprise the volume: the silence of complicity, the silenced victims of atrocity, the silences of legal redress, the silent resentment of dispossession, the silences of literature in its refusals to offer consolation, and the heretofore silent possibilities and promises of the incalculable as it bursts onto tightly governed scenes of polarization. The book has found a keen readership in Turkey, receiving high praise from reviewers and going into second printing within a month of its publication.

Here I mainly focus on the opening essay of the collection, entitled “Crime and Punishment: Raskolnikov, Klaus Barbie, Kenan Evren,” not only because it is particularly notable for law and literature scholarship, but also because only a closer examination would allow a sense of the kind of space that Gürbilek creates for imaginative critical thought through her writing. Of the three proper names in the essay's title, perhaps the only one that requires an introduction here is Evren. He was the general who led Turkey's brutal 1980 military coup and then ruled as the

country's president for seven years. He maintained his impunity in his retirement, until a controversial and hugely polarizing referendum in 2010, held for maximum symbolic effect on exactly the 30th anniversary of the coup d'état. The referendum introduced numerous constitutional amendments to do with the judiciary, including the one that would allow the prosecution of the junta leaders. But there was an element of the tragic in this: in retrospect, it is easy to identify the referendum as a key milestone in the AKP government's power grab, and at the time, keener observers highlighted the threat posed by the amendments to what little there was of judicial independence. Yet for others, especially those who had survived the worst of the state violence of the coup years, the promise of justice at last was a priority, and the demons of unsettled history seemed to cloud judgment. Evren and the only other living coup leader's trial began in April 2012; the two were convicted of crimes against the state in June 2014 and sentenced to life imprisonment. Evren was cared for in a military hospital throughout his trial and after his conviction, until his death in May 2015, at age 97.

Much of the critique of Evren's trial has been limited to a regretful lament: "not soon enough, not thorough enough." Gürbilek's approach is otherwise: she addresses, head on, the bitter truth at the core of Evren's defense in the trial, which he succinctly formulated as "We made a coup d'état, we didn't attempt it. The difference between a coup and an attempted coup must be clear to all."² But the naked cynicism of the negative correlation between victory and accountability is transformed into luminous matter in Gürbilek's treatment. She thinks it through with Raskolnikov and his feverish battle with precisely this correlation in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and then elaborates upon it with the famous French defense lawyer Jacques Vergès' "strategy of rupture"³ and his particularly controversial mobilization of this strategy in his defense of Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie. Gürbilek entertains how the trial would have played out had Vergès defended Evren. In her detailed and convincingly ventriloquized articulation of a rupture defense on Evren's behalf, it becomes crystal clear that the coup's violence would not have been possible without the openly declared complicity of capitalists, opinion leaders, university presidents, columnists; and the implicit complicity of military staff, police chiefs, prison wardens, prison doctors, police officers, judges, prosecutors, and expert witnesses. More importantly, the rupture defense further substantiates Evren's claim to impunity as a lawgiver, exposing the extent to which the current government owes its power to the coup's violence. Here, the counterfactual, or devil's advocacy, serves as a provocation to awake from the slumber of lazy memory-work we seek in the symbolism of such legal spectacles, instead pointing to the much more complicated labor required to reckon with not only past atrocity, but also its continuities in the present.

But devil's advocacy à la Vergès has its own dangers: dissipating culpability, relativizing atrocity, and even justifying it (p. 43). Gürbilek suggests that rupture strategy does not settle but only provides a point of departure for the question of

justice. Returning to *Crime and Punishment* to tease out the difference between Vergès' "art of justice" and the justice of art and literature, Gürbilek claims that the significance of Dostoevsky's novel is its simultaneous articulation of two conflicting questions. The first is Raskolnikov's question of rupture à la Vergès: why are law-givers celebrated for their crimes when I have to suffer the punishment? But then there is a second question that Raskolnikov battles with: do I have the right to shed blood for the sake of a higher purpose? For Gürbilek, the legacy of *Crime and Punishment* is that it poses these questions simultaneously. Thus she asks, in a final flourish, "can there be an idea of justice that does not annul the first question, and a strategy of rupture that does not silence the second?" (p. 41). It is this kind of agility of thought that explains something of the appeal of Gürbilek's writing in interesting times. And she brings it to a wide range of subjects: her reading of Leo Tolstoy's biography in the light of Theodor Adorno's question "can one lead a good life in a bad life?" (chapter 2); her analysis of the representation of poverty through the figure of the child in the works of Orhan Kemal and Kemalettin Tuğcu (chapter 3); her rereading of Peyami Safa's *Fatih-Harbiye* and its core problematic of the gap between the oriental and the occidental in light of the Gezi uprising of June 2013, which she interprets as a rupture in traditions of governmentality that utilize this gap (chapter 4); and her exploration of the role of writing vis-à-vis loss, violence, and catastrophe through the works of Coetzee, Blanchot, Adorno, Nichanian, Améry, and others (chapter 5). When executed with such incisive acuity and erudition, cultural criticism begins to take on the qualities of a basic necessity.

1. Nurdan Gürbilek, *The New Cultural Climate in Turkey: Living in a Shop Window* (London: Zed, 2011).

2. "Evren: İhtilale teşebbüs etmedik, yaptık," *Cumhuriyet* (November 21, 2012), http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/diger/384958/Evren__ihtilale_tesebbus_etmedik__yaptik.html/.

3. Jacques Vergès, *De la stratégie judiciaire* (Paris: Minuit, 1968).

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